

# **Developing a Community Response Team for the Garland Fire Department**

Executive Leadership

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### **Abstract**

Across the nation, emergency response agencies daily answer the call for assistance when neighbors and fellow community members are desperate for help. The terrorist attack on New York City revealed that even one of the largest well-funded agencies in the country can be overwhelmed. America now recognizes that even a well-funded professional fire department can experience an overwhelming incident, be it a terrorist attack, a natural disaster, or a man-made disaster. This need has been addressed by a presidential call to Americans to volunteer for the betterment of their community and country through the Citizens Corps program. The Citizens Corps encompasses many volunteer organizations including the Community Emergency Response Team program (CERT).

The purpose of this research project was to examine the feasibility of creating a CERT team in the city of Garland. An evaluative research approach was employed to address the following questions:

1. What are the benefits to the citizens of Garland by having a CERT team?
2. What training is necessary to prepare a CERT team?
3. What specific application would a CERT team have for Garland?

This research project utilized a literature review, personal interviews with local officials already involved with CERT teams, and a survey of members of the Citizens Fire Club of Garland.

The results of this research indicated that a CERT program would benefit the city of Garland and would be supported by members of the community.

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## **Introduction**

Garland is a city in Texas with population of 215,768. The city covers 57 square miles with nine fire stations, thirteen fire fighting apparatus, and a force of 230 professional firefighters. The department is well funded and trains regularly in a variety of disciplines, and other city departments are aligned to support the fire department in the event of a large-scale emergency incident. The city of Garland Health department, the Office of Emergency Management, the police department, Building inspections, and the Transportation department have preliminary training to provide coordinated, organized assistance in a large-scale disaster. However, despite this level of training and diverse organization, a large-scale disaster could overwhelm the resources, leaving critical needs unanswered for long periods of time.

Following a major disaster, first responders who provide fire and medical services will not be able to meet the demand for these services. Factors as number of victims, communication failures, and road blockages will prevent people from accessing emergency services they have come to expect at a moment's notice through 911. People will have to rely on each other for help in order to meet their immediate life saving and life sustaining needs (Emergency Management Institute, 2003).

The purpose of this Applied Research Project (ARP) is to determine the feasibility of starting a CERT for the Garland Fire Department. Evaluative research is used to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the benefits to the citizens of Garland by having a CERT team?
2. What training is necessary to prepare a CERT team?

3. What specific application would a CERT team have for Garland?

### **Background and Significance**

Garland is a community of approximately 220,000 residents, making it the second largest city in Dallas County, the tenth largest in the state of Texas, and among the 100 largest in the United States. Garland encompasses 57 square miles located in the northeastern portion of the Dallas/Fort Worth metro-area. Of Garland's 57 square miles of land area, approximately 85% has been developed. Garland's economic and industrial base is composed of over 5,000 businesses operating within the community. Major industries include electronics-related manufacturing, metal fabrication, paints and chemicals, and food processing. Garland Power & Light has three gas-fired generating plants, which combine to produce 640 megawatts of generation capacity. Garland's electric distribution system has 1,007 miles of overhead lines and 1,000 miles of underground lines. Its transmission system consists of 20 substations and 133 miles of transmission lines. Garland's peak load for 2003 was 493 megawatts, with annual operating revenues over \$184 million dollars. Garland has 5 major highways, three freight lines, and a passenger light rail system that serves the Dallas metropolitan area. Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) Freeway (IH-635), President George Bush Turnpike (SH 190), IH-30, State Highway 66, and State Highway 78 carry large amounts of traffic in and around the city daily. IH-635, a designated hazardous material route for the Dallas metro-area runs along the southern border of the city.

Garland Fire Department (GFD) is well funded and professionally trained. GFD provides emergency medical service and emergency fire protection. The community is

well served by the Health Department, Emergency Management department, as well as the police and fire departments. GFD is comprised of 230 professional fire fighters operating from 10 fire stations and an Administrative office building. The community is well served by these city departments, and has developed a sense of expectation about the level of service provided. However, a large-scale disaster could expose a weakness in service delivery. This false sense of security and complacency about emergency response could lead to a shocking reality if the responsible agencies do not develop a proactive attitude and initiate community teams to intervene in the worst-case scenario of a large-scale disaster.

This research will determine if implementing a CERT program would benefit the city of Garland. This research is related to the developing decision-making skills section of Executive Leadership, a portion of the Executive Fire Officer Program provided by the National Fire Academy. This research is related to the United States Fire Administration's (USFA) operational objective, "to respond quickly and effectively when States, Territories, Tribal Nations, and local governments are overwhelmed". (USFA, 2004c).

### **Literature Review**

The literature review consisted of using the Internet, the National Fire Academy's Learning Resource Center, personal interviews, and a survey. The City of Los Angeles officials went to Japan in 1985 to study its extensive earthquake preparedness plans. They group encountered entire neighborhoods trained in single-function teams such as fire suppression, search and rescue and rescue operations. Later that year, an investigative team from Los Angeles went to Mexico City following an earthquake there.

The team reported that despite not having a training program for citizens prior to the disaster, large groups of volunteers organized themselves and performed rescue operations. The lessons learned in Mexico City gave impetus to a plan to train volunteers to help themselves and others, and become an adjunct to government response. According to the information in the Los Angeles CERT web site, the Los Angeles Fire Department developed a pilot program to train a group of leaders in a neighborhood watch organization in 1986 (Los Angeles Fire Department, 2004). In 1993, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) made the CERT program available nationwide. The Emergency Management Institute (EMI) expanded the CERT materials to make them applicable to all hazards.

On January 29, 2002, in his first State of the Union Address following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, President George W. Bush invited Americans to join the USA Freedom Corps to enhance homeland security (Bush, 2004). USA Freedom Corps became the umbrella organization for volunteer opportunities across America, including the Citizen Corps. CERT was organized as a part of Citizen Corps, offering volunteers an opportunity to help their country and community. On the Citizen Corps website, it mentions that over the next two years, the CERT program aims to double the number of participants, with over 400,000 individuals completing the 20 plus hours of training. Train-the-Trainer sessions will be held in all 56 states and territories over the next year to expand the program throughout the United States (Citizens Corps, 2004). In a media release dated December 10, 2004, The U.S. Fire Administration announced the official launch of the Fire Corps (U.S. Fire Administration, 2004). The media release indicates that Fire Corps was created to support fire departments across the country by

leveraging community volunteer efforts to handle non-emergency activities.

Furthermore, Fire Corps volunteer activities may include assisting fire department personnel with administrative duties, performing education and outreach efforts to encourage fire safety and prevention, supporting CERT training in emergency preparedness and basic response techniques (U.S. Fire Administration, 2004). The media release goes on to say:

As a Program Partner of President George W. Bush's grass-roots initiative Citizens Corps, Fire Corps will work through local Citizens Corps Councils across the country to offer citizens education, training and volunteer opportunities. Fire Corps is a partnership between the National Volunteer Council (NVFC), the International Association Of Fire Chiefs' Volunteer Combination Officers Section (VCOS), the International Association of Fire Firefighters (IAFF), and the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Fire Administration and Office of State and Local Government Preparedness and Coordination (U.S. Fire Administration, 2004).

The Fire Corps mission is to enhance the ability of fire departments to utilize citizen advocates and provide individuals with opportunities to support their local fire departments with their time and talent (Fire Corps, 2004). The Fire Corps website offers information concerning the new program, including a frequently asked questions section that encourages existing citizen outreach programs to register as a part of Fire Corps (Fire Corps, 2004). The website also mentions existing services available from Fire Corps include:



- An expanding database of fire department programs in the United States
- Program documents (handbooks, application forms, evaluation forms, etc.)
- Links to other websites (USA Freedom Corps, Citizen Corps) that have information on program considerations

In the future, Fire Corps will offer:

- Additional sample policies, protocols and procedures
- Training curricula
- On-site technical assistance
- Peer-to-peer program assistance
- Regional symposiums

In a local application, the Citizens Corps becomes the Texas Citizens Corps. On the Texas Citizens Corps website, it states that the purpose of forming local Citizen Corps Councils throughout Texas is to focus on opportunities for Texas to participate in a range of volunteer measures to make their families, homes, and communities safer from the threats of terrorism, crime, and disasters of all kinds. The Texas Association of Regional Councils, a public entity, administers the Citizens Corps and CERT programs in Texas through councils of governments (COGS) (Texas Citizens Corps, 2004).

The formation of a CERTS program inevitably leads to the Emergency Management Institute (EMI). The EMI website contains a wealth of information concerning how to start a CERTS program, the training involved, and how to keep the program in place. The following information is listed on the website:

CERTS are formed by members of a neighborhood or workplace who want to be better prepared for the hazards that threaten their communities. Initially, CERT programs were developed to assist communities in taking care of themselves in the aftermath of a major disaster when first responders are overwhelmed or unable to respond because of communication or transportation difficulties. As the CERT concept has taken hold across the country, however, CERT's have become much more than originally envisioned. CERT's have proven themselves to be an active and vital part of their communities' preparedness and response capability. For example, CERT's have been used to:

- Distribute and/or install smoke alarms and batteries to the elderly and disabled.
- Assist with evacuations and traffic control.
- Promote community awareness of potential hazards and preparedness measures.
- Supplement staffing at special events, such as parades.
- Act as victims in training exercises.

CERT's are an investment of local government's time and resources. To capitalize on this investment, program sponsors can view CERT members as a volunteer resource that can assist with public safety activities. Such an approach will actively involve members in serving their communities beyond disaster response and add value to the CERT program. The best source of help in an emergency or disaster is the paid or volunteer professional responder. But, if

they are not available to address immediate life-saving needs or to protect property, CERT members can help. A CERT is not intended to replace a community's response capability, but rather, to serve as an important supplement to it. The agency sponsoring the CERT program is creating a volunteer resource that is part of the community's operational capability following a disaster. That agency should develop training standards for CERT personnel and protocols for their activation and use. CERT members must keep their safety in mind as their first priority. CERT volunteers must know their capabilities and the limitations of their training and equipment and work within those limitations.

CERT's do NOT:

- Suppress large fires.
- Enter structures that they consider heavily damaged and dangerous (e.g., leaning or moved from foundation).
- Perform hazardous materials cleanup or respond to incidents involving radiological, chemical, or biological agents.
- Perform medical, fire, or search and rescue operations beyond their level of training.
- Activate or deploy unless called for in their procedures.

CERT's are considered "Good Samaritans" and covered under the Volunteer Protection Act. CERT volunteers do not have any authority beyond serving as "Good Samaritan" when helping others.

When deployed appropriately, however, CERT's can complement and enhance first-response capability in neighborhoods and workplaces by ensuring the safety of themselves and their families working outward to the neighborhood or office and beyond until first responders arrive. CERT's can then assist first-response personnel as directed. (Emergency Management Institute, 2004)

CERT's training has been formatted to take advantage of the Internet. EMI is offering an on-line introductory CERTS course titled IS 317. This interactive course is available on-line as an independent study that serves as an introduction to CERT for those wanting to complete the training or as a refresher for current team members. However, to become a CERT volunteer, one must complete the training offered by a local government agency such as the fire or police department, or local emergency management agency (EMI, 2004). The CERT training materials are available at the EMI website at <http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/cert/mtrls.asp>.

The CERTS training course consists of eight

modules:

- Disaster Preparedness
- Fire Suppression
- Disaster medical operations (2 modules)
- Light search and rescue
- Terrorism and CERT
- Team organization and disaster psychology

- Course review and disaster simulation

Each course module requires 2 to 2 ½ hours to complete (Texas Citizens Corps, 2004).

Area cities in close proximity to Garland have active CERT programs. The city of Rowlett, Texas formed a CERT team in 2001. Rowlett's first actual CERT team was trained by a group of ham radio operators sent to the National Fire Academy for a train the trainer course (Campbell, 2004). Recruiting for the Rowlett CERT program was accomplished by using booths at public events, articles and advertisements about CERT in the local newspapers, a flyer in the water bill, and a presentation before the city council (Campbell, 2004). According to this information, the water bill flyer received the most response.

McKinney, Texas is another area city that has an active CERT team. According to an article in Texas Fire Chief Magazine, the four steps McKinney followed in establishing a Cert Program were:

1. Present citizens the facts about what to expect following a major disaster in McKinney in terms of immediate services.
2. Give the message about citizens' responsibility for mitigation and preparedness.
3. Train them in needed lifesaving skills with emphasis on decision-making skills, rescuer safety, and doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

4. Organize teams so that they are an extension of the first responder services offering immediate help to victims until professional services arrive (Texas Fire Chief, 2004).

According to McKinney Fire Chief Mark Wallace, the McKinney CERT program divided the city by school district with the goal of having one CERT team in each school district (Wallace, 2004). Chief Wallace advised that McKinney was planning a “disaster day” to exercise the CERT skills, and that they were conducting a CERT Olympics to showcase the development of the CERT program (Wallace, 2004). Chief Wallace plans to integrate the industrial sector into the CERT program by developing a team in the industrial/commercial portions of the city, and possibly gain a sponsor to assist funding the McKinney CERT program.

The Garland chapter of the Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service (RACES) offers critical communication components in the event of massive communication failures in the emergency radio network. By integrating the RACES group into the Garland CERT program, critical communications could be provided. RACES is an organization of amateur operators who provide radio communications needed by local, state, and federal governments in time of emergency. The role of amateur radio operators has been amplified over the years to include support to local emergency management during natural disasters, critical local incidents, and now terrorism (Larson, 2004). Training the local RACES group in the CERT program applies to the third question in this research, what application would a CERT team have specifically for Garland.

Funding for CERT programs is available through grants appropriated by the federal government. Texas Governor Rick Perry announced in August of 2004 that 57 local governments and regional organizations will receive approximately \$1.4 million in federal Citizen Corps funds to prepare Texans for homeland security duties (Rick Perry, 2004). Additionally, The Texas Citizens Corps announced the availability of grant funding for local governments of approximately \$735,000 for planning, outreach, and management of Citizens Corps programs, including CERT (Texas Citizens Corps, 2004).

In summary, the reviewed literature confirmed the need for Americans to volunteer to enhance the emergency response. Many communities have recognized the documented fact that day-to-day emergency response will be overwhelmed should a large disaster take place and established successful CERT programs. The information revealed in the literature review confirmed the federal standards in place and training programs available for beginning a CERT program. Furthermore, the literature review revealed funding sources for planning and management of CERT programs as well as a variety of other citizen advocate programs.

## **PROCEDURES**

Evaluative methodology was used to research CERT programs in the course of developing this project. The procedures used to complete this project included a literature review that included several trade journals and government websites on the Internet, a survey of an existing citizens group, a personal interview, and a review of the city of Garland's structure and organization.

A feedback instrument (Appendix A) was developed and distributed to 40 members of the Garland Fire Club. The survey was first reviewed and adopted from an applied research project developed by Jim Kitchens for the Coppell Fire Department (Kitchens, 2002). The instrument was modified to better fit the Garland application and other members of the Garland Fire Department staff reviewed a draft version. The revised questionnaire contained seven questions and was then distributed to the members of the Garland Fire Club (GFC). The GFC was used as a survey group because they have already demonstrated an interest in volunteering for their community and they have a working knowledge of the level of service provided by the fire department. The statistical interpretation was then extracted from the feedback received.

An overview of the city of Garland's structure and organization was conducted to develop a snapshot of the critical components of the community. The overview was used to better determine the application needs for a CERTS program.

A personal interview of a local fire chief was conducted to determine the parameters of an existing CERT program in a local application. The interview was designed to reveal what components of the program were successful and how the CERT program was applied to the fire department. An assumption was made that all survey questionnaires were answered with factual responses. The participants in the survey represent a small portion of the citizens residing in Garland.



## RESULTS

The first research question, what are the benefits to the citizens of Garland by having a CERT team, was answered by the information obtained from the literature review and the overview of the Garland structure and organization. The size and diversity of the city of Garland makes it vulnerable to disaster that could overwhelm the existing emergency response. The information obtained from the literature review revealed the scope of the problems emergency response organizations face when large disasters strike. Additionally, the literature review confirmed the value that a CERT program brings to a community by offering a conduit to those in the community willing to volunteer in a viable program.

The second research question, what training is necessary to prepare a CERT team, was answered by the program training curricula developed by the federal agencies associated with emergency response and citizen advocate groups. Many organizations start with the established criteria offered by the federal government and adapt it to better fit the local situation and needs.

The third research question, what specific application would a CERT team have for the city of Garland, was answered by the survey instrument that was offered to the 40 members of the Garland Fire Club. Of the 40 questionnaires sent, 28 were completed and returned. The questionnaire was designed to provide insight into the willingness of volunteers to participate in a CERT program and to find those willing to assume a leadership role in the program. The 70 percent response rate and the response detail provided by the returned surveys add credence to the development of a CERT program for the city of Garland. The responses to the survey overwhelmingly

endorsed their willingness to participate in a CERT (89 percent). Of those respondents willing to participate, 24 percent expressed a willingness to take a leadership role.

### **Discussion**

There are numerous instances of major disasters over-whelming emergency response organizations for many years in all types and sizes of agencies. Even prior to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, emergency responders were seeking solutions on how better to cope with large disasters. The World Trade Center attack provided focus and energy as well as additional grant funding as fire departments across the nation began reaching out to citizen advocate groups. As the groundswell movement gained momentum, CERT programs have sprung up in numerous cities as Americans have begun to respond to President Bush's call to volunteer for the betterment of America. Communities have begun to organize and train to enhance homeland security at the neighborhood level. With survey results indicating that Garland citizens are willing to not only participate, but ready to take a leadership role, the decision to begin developing a CERT program becomes clearer.

An additional benefit indicated by the research was the improvement of public relations between the fire department and the community. McKinney Fire Chief Mark Wallace indicated that communication and public support markedly improved as the CERT program developed in McKinney (Wallace, personal communication, 2004). Community support and grant funding supports the decision to begin a CERT program.

The basic classes offered by the Emergency Management Institute can be tailored to the needs in Garland. The basic structure and organization already in place

in Garland provides a solid foundation to begin a CERT program. Garland has an existing Emergency Management Agency that can assist with developing the program. The existing Garland RACES organization could be approached to enter the program and provide their communication skills for the CERT team. The Garland Health Department and Police Department have representatives that can provide critical input as the program applies to that area of interest.

Grant funding already being offered helps offset any concerns about escalating costs associated with a CERT program. It is unrealistic that the CERT program would be funded with grant monies, but the costs could be kept to a manageable level.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This research project confirms the need for Garland to develop a CERT program. Many communities have suffered major disasters and witnessed their emergency response agencies being overwhelmed in the critical early stages of the event. The information obtained in the literature review provides the foundation for beginning a program, and the results of the survey provide direction for a CERT application specific for Garland. The information concerning grant funding provides energy and impetus for getting a CERT started.

Based on this research, it is recommend that a team consisting of members of the Garland Emergency Management Agency, Garland Police Department, Garland Health Department, and Garland Fire Department develop a strategic plan for starting a CERT program that encompasses the basic courses offered by the Emergency Management Institute and tailored to the needs and structure existing in Garland.

Future readers of this research are recommended to examine the FEMA and EMI websites, as well as the Citizen Corps website, to get the latest developments.

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## APPENDIX

### Survey of Members of the Garland Citizens Fire Club

**DIRECTIONS:** Please respond to the following questions about a Citizen  
Emergency Response Team (CERT)

1. How long have you been a member of this organization? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Do you believe this organization has benefited Garland Fire Dept? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Would you participate in a Citizens Emergency Response Team? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Which of the following would you recommend be included in the training curriculum:  
\_\_\_\_ Search and Rescue    \_\_\_\_ Storm Spotting    \_\_\_\_ Utility Control  
\_\_\_\_ Damage Assessment    \_\_\_\_ Communications  
\_\_\_\_ Emergency First Aid    \_\_\_\_ Neighborhood Accountability
5. Would you be willing to assume a leadership role? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Would you be willing to coordinate the training of CERTS? \_\_\_\_\_
7. What do you consider Garland's biggest potential threat(s)? \_\_\_\_\_